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Answers to Questions

PAPAL INFALLIBILITY BEFORE 1870

Question: Would a man who, prior to 1870, refused to accept the dogma of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception (defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854), on the grounds that he did not believe in the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff, have been guilty of heresy?

Answer: He definitely would have been guilty of heresy. This answer remains true despite the fact that the dogma of papal infallibility was not defined until nearly sixteen years after the appearance of the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, in which Pope Pius IX proclaimed and defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

It is obvious, of course, that before 1870 a man would not have been guilty of heresy for denying or questioning the teaching on papal infallibility which the Vatican Council finally proposed and defined as divinely revealed dogma. Now what the Council defined as a divinely revealed dogma was the truth that "the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, exercising his function as the pastor and teacher of all Christians, by his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine about faith or morals to be held by the entire Church, possesses, through the divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be equipped in defining doctrine about faith or morals; and therefore the definitions of the same Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves, and not by reason of the consent of the Church."

The point which had been more or less legitimately at issue prior to the Vatican definition was the teaching stated in the last portion of this declaration. The Gallican theologians had maintained that definitions issued by the Holy Father were to be accepted as absolutely irrevocable, as accurate statements about faith or morals which were in no way subject to any future reconsideration or revision, precisely because the universal Church of God on earth received and professed its acceptance of these pronouncements by

the Holy Father. Despite the frightful inconsistencies inherent in their politically motivated system, these theologians recognized the fact that the true Church militant of Jesus Christ, God's kingdom on earth, is and must be united by doctrinal, sacramental, and governmental bonds with the Roman Pontiff. Thus they were quite aware of the fact that what he teaches definitively in the field of faith or morals is actually believed by the entire Catholic Church.

Hence, for what we may call the orthodox Gallicans in the period between 1854 and 1870, there was absolutely no difficulty about the dogma of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. It had been proclaimed as a dogma by a pontifical declaration and it had been accepted as a dogma by the universal Church militant. They chose to believe that the infallible or irrevocable force of this teaching derived from the acceptance by the universal Church rather than from the definitive statement by the Vicar of Christ. Yet this contention did not in any way hinder them from receiving the teaching that Mary had been conceived absolutely free from original sin as divinely revealed truth.

Their teaching about the source of the infallibility inherent in papal definitions about faith and morals was rightly condemned as heretical by the Vatican Council, when it proclaimed the contradictory of that teaching as a dogma of the Catholic faith. But it must be noted that these theologians were never guilty of any sweeping and absolute denial of papal infallibility, and that they never assumed any position which would have made acceptance of the Immaculate Conception dogma practically impossible for themselves or for their followers.

The hypothetical position described in the question with which we are here concerned would manifestly have been a sweeping and absolute denial of papal infallibility, of a type completely incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy. The man who held that position refused to accept a dogma defined as such by the Vicar of Christ and believed as such by the infallible Church militant. That position could not be designated as other than heretical.

JOSEPH CLIFFORD FENTON